Ferguson, Florida, and Fruitvale: A Requiem for Black Males in the Key of F-Minor

Fred A. Bonner II
Prairie View A&M University, USA

During my adolescent years, we referred to the elder statesmen and stateswomen in my church as our "seasoned saints." I vividly remember the call and response rounds they would engage the church in when they sang one of my favorite gospel songs--the refrain *I don't want no trouble at the river, I don't want no trouble at the river, I don't want no trouble at the river when it's time for me to cross to the other side.*

We have made it to the river and we *have trouble* in our efforts to cross to the other side. What this commentary attempts to offer is a counter-narrative to consider as we attempt to divine solutions that will provide us safe passage to our destination of racial equality, solidarity, and uplift on "the other side."

It was Josh Harkinson's article *4 Unarmed Black Men Have Been Killed By Police in the Last Month* that helped me to frame the Commentary that I was commissioned to complete for *Teachers College Record.* The stark reality in the author's portrayal of what was seemingly becoming an eerily dire trend in the country made me take pause and begin the deliberate process of trying to digest the news in small bites. Yet, despite my best efforts to swallow this jagged little pill, the acidity of racial reflux not only troubled my stomach but also disquieted my soul. Somehow, perhaps as a way to ease the pain of my own personal feelings about what I perceived to be an "open season" on Black men in the country, I at an organic level unwittingly started to shift my discourse about these men, and particularly when I was required to talk about them in public spaces I described them not by name, but by the locations where they met their untimely demise. Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, and Oscar Grant III became coded as Ferguson, Florida, and Fruitvale--a congeries of locales that allowed me to reframe and rename these tragedies in a way that took away a bit of the sting coming from the lash of the whip that appeared to indiscriminatingly mete out punishments to my fellow brothers.

Notwithstanding my best efforts at psychological subterfuge, I had to face the harsh reality that it was not the place or space where these tragedies occurred that required my attention, but it was the cohort of individuals in these settings that required the focus of my gaze. I discussed the power of words, especially the use of labels in two separate articles I completed in 2006 that underscored the implications of the Hurricane Katrina tragedy on the African American residents in the city of New Orleans. I spoke to the use of the term "refugee" by those who reported on this incident and the residents who sought living accommodations and shelter in surrounding cities and states. The mainstream media was particularly culpable in their application of this moniker. My sense was that the use of this label made these American citizens appear to not only be nonresident but also foreign. It was something about the zeitgeist of that time related to the Katrina incident that appeared to set the stage for the subsequent framing of these Katrina survivors in a particular way. Perhaps the best explanation I can offer to explain how I viewed these occurrences is reflected in the theme I used in the article to categorize these events. I titled the section, *The Person Who Labels Has the Power.* In essence, because the media was able to set the stage, they named both the story and the people. While I did not fall prey to following the direction of the drum major in regard to the Katrina Tragedy, I did find myself sinking into the abyss of speaking about the shooting deaths of these young Black men in terms that were, from my perspective, media directed.

Beyond my personal sadness and struggle to comprehend the shooting deaths of Michael Brown, Oscar Grant III, Trayvon Martin, and Tamir Rice as well as the choking death of Eric Garner, I reflected on a number of issues that I perceived to be critical in framing the plight of young Black males in not only my professional field of education, but in society in general. What I have divined is that the experiences of Black males in P-20 schooling contexts, particularly as it overlaps with broader society is quite parallel. Perhaps the most fitting axiom to underscore my viewpoint is a statement that I share whenever I speak to audiences about my research on African American males in education settings; namely, "These men are not just Black and male when they come to school--they are Black and male all the time and that means something 'in here' and especially 'out there'." These reflections led me to the development of what I saw as four key themes that have meaning for how we attempt to understand the ways Black males interface with society in general and the education system in particular. Michael, Oscar, Trayvon, Tamir, and Eric were not murdered in schools; however, my argument is that Black males are killed in our nation's classrooms on a routine basis. The four themes include: **Theme 1:** *Speaking in Tongues: Black Masculinity and the Tower of Babel*; **Theme 2:** *Referencing Rachmaninoff: A Threat to the Black Male Stereotype*; **Theme 3:** *Talking about My Generation: Black Male Millennial Culture;* **Theme 4:** *Meaning Making Beyond Morse: Code Switching and Survival Strategies.*

Theme 1: *Speaking in Tongues: Black Masculinity and the Tower of Babel*

This theme was developed to reflect the complexity and confusion that I have witnessed among agents within and external to educational settings who have attempted to explain and provide context for the expression of Black masculinity. All too often the first steps in this process of problematizing and subsequently offering solutions for understanding just how Black masculinity could be molded and shaped to fit the environment begins with separation of the constituent identity elements that make these individuals who they are. Thus, being a concomitant--Black/male becomes how we parcel Blackness and maleness to seek viable solutions that will address these identity vectors in isolation. In actuality a true understanding of these individuals is not found in silos that contain representative identity parts but in crucibles that allow for the mixture of these elements to come together that make the whole. In circles that often are drawn by academics' conversations about intersectionality and what it means to be all of one's identify at the same time as opposed to a set of unconnected dots awaiting the no.2 lead pencil to connect them. Hence, the talk about Black masculinity becomes at best fragmented and at worst distorted because the respective parties involved in the discourse are reflecting on constituent parts as opposed to the aggregated whole.

Theme 2: *Referencing Rachmaninoff: A Threat to the Black Male Stereotype*

Claude Steele masterfully unpacks the situational predicament known as *stereotype threat* in his book *Whistling Vivaldi*. What Steele problematizes in this work is the resultant impact of stereotype threat which is the belief held by individuals that they will confirm negative stereotypes about their social group. Steele provides vivid context for the book by chronicling the story of a young African American male who routinely walked down a particular street on his way to his intended destination. While the usual course of action for many of the White pedestrians he would attempt to pass on his journey would be to cross the street in order to avoid coming in close contact with him, on one of his walks he started to whistle a tune, and that tune was the music of the classical composer Antonio Vivaldi. What the young man noticed is that individuals who would have ordinarily crossed the street did not do so. The implication is that by whistling Vivaldi he seemed less menacing and less of a threat. After all, how could this man be all of those stereotypical things that are associated with Black men when he knew classical music? Thus, by whistling this tune he was able to in some ways disrupt the narrative about what it meant to be Black and male in the inner-city space.

As an African American male my own emic experiences corroborate what Steele highlights in his book. My selection of this theme is an adaption of Steele's book title, but it is an authentic representation of experiences that I have had in my attempts to establish some sense of agency in White academia as well as in society writ large. As an undergraduate I majored in chemistry and for several years maintained a minor in music (piano performance). I find that these two biographical factoids have provided me fuel and subsequently mileage on the long and circuitous journey through

mainstream American culture. I surreptitiously infuse into conversations in which I know that my intellectual acumen is being adjudged. One of my favorite composers I used to satisfy my musical appetite when I was steeped in music theory courses and piano lessons during my undergraduate days was Rachmaninoff. I would sometimes lock myself away in one of the "piano rooms" there on the University of North Texas campus and play to hearts content or at least until I could ease my level of stress from trying to balance a very demanding course schedule. So, dropped right into conversations at the time when the cultural capital vetting process seems to be at its most heightened state, I mention my K-12 experiences advancing to state level competition in piano during both my junior and senior years in high school. Just as the Black male in Steele's book took notice of the warming of the chill that was in the air, I too found that I could slip out of my coat for just a few moments.

Theme 3: ***Talking about My Generation: Black Male Millennial Culture***

In 2011 I co-edited a book with my colleagues titled *Diverse Millennial Students in College: Implications for Faculty and Student Affairs*. What this volume attempted to accomplish was to shed light on the millennial cohort of college students that were occupying postsecondary institutions. The book highlighted millennial culture with a fine-grained focus on millennials from diverse ethnic and racial enclaves. The authors each provided data and information that would assist faculty and student affairs practitioners to better understand this generational cohort. Readily apparent in the book is that millennials of color in some ways paralleled their majority peers in related to their interests and motivations, but just as many commonalities were discovered as was an almost equal list of dissimilarities, Thus, for Black male populations in higher education the challenge for institutions is to understand who they are not only from ethnic, gender, and racial perspectives but to also consider where they are coming from based on their generational affiliations.

Theme 4: ***Meaning Making Beyond Morse: Code Switching and Other Survival Strategies***

A sociolinguistic term that has been consistently threaded across my scholarly and research engagements has been the concept code switching. Recognizing the importance of altering behavior (code) is essential for Black male survival. In Theme 3 above, I along with the Black male mentioned in Steele's book engaged in a process of code switching by altering our behavior or conversational patterns to fit the contexts in which we were situated. A lack of understanding of when and where to switch codes for Black males can prove to be deadly. Some Black males have expressed that shifting away from their preconceived notions of what Black maleness looks like and how it should be performed leaves many of these men expressing angst about what they perceive to be an inauthentic representation of who they really are. Thus, statements like, "I keep it 100" is their attempt at expressing the need to be authentic.

So, as we gather in an encampment at the banks of the river, it will be essential for us to find ways to "sing off the same song sheet" and perhaps we will then find ways to harmonize joyful songs of celebration and triumph as opposed to blending foreboding melodies of sadness and defeat.

References

Bonner, F. (2014). Building on resilience: Models and frameworks of Black male success across the P-20 pipeline. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

Bonner, F. A. II, Marbley, A.F. & Howard-Hamilton, M. (2011). *Diverse millennial students in college: Implications for faculty and student affairs*. VA: Stylus Publishing.

Harkinson, J. (2014). 4 Unarmed black men have been killed by police in the last month. Retrieved from: http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2014/08/3-unarmed-black-african-american-men-killed-police

Kendall, D. (2002). *The power of good deeds: Privileged women and the social reproduction of* class. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

About the Author

Fred Bonner II, *Ph.D.*, is Professor and Endowed Chair in Educational Leadership and Counseling at Prairie View A&M University. He is formerly the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Endowed Chair in Education in the Graduate School of Education at Rutgers University and an esteemed expert in the field of diversity in education. Prior to joining Rutgers, he was Professor of Higher Education Administration and Dean of Faculties at Texas A&M University-College Station. He earned a B.A. in chemistry from the University of North Texas, an M.S. Ed. in curriculum and instruction from Baylor University, and an Ed.D. in higher education administration & college teaching from the University of Arkansas. Bonner has been the recipient of numerous awards, including the American Association for Higher Education Black Caucus Dissertation Award and the Educational Leadership, Counseling and Foundation's Dissertation of the Year Award from the University of Arkansas College of Education. His work has been featured nationally and internationally. He is the author of the recently released book *Building on Resilience: Models and Frameworks of Black Male Success Across the P-20 Pipeline.*

Address

Fred A. Bonner II, Ed.D.
Prairie View A&M University
Whitlowe R. Green College of Education
Professor and Endowed Chair
Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling
239 Delco Building
Prairie View, Texas 77446

e-Mail: fabonner@pvamu.edu